

Burial Rites Among the Ga of Ghana: Contemporary Fantasy Coffins

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| **Introduction**  |
| Burial and death rites are part of the study of culture. Many cultures have different practices and processes for the dead. The so-called “fantasy” coffin is a contemporary, popular alternative to plain caskets among the Ga people in Ghana. In this lesson, students will explore the purposes and uses of these coffins, how they are made, how they represent the individuals for whom they are created and may even make comparisons between this practice and other burial/death rites of other cultures. [Infact, one can compare these coffins to American coffins decorated as beer cans or other objects.] |
| **Indiana Standards Connections:** 7.3.3 – Describe and compare major cultural characteristics of regions in Africa, Asia, and Southwest Pacific. Examples: language, religion, recreation, clothing, diet, fine arts, family structure, and traditionsES.3.1 – Students identify and explore current traditions, rites, and norms of an ethnic or racial group(s) and how they have or are changing over time. S.2.1 – Define culture and identify the material and non-material components of culture.  | **Compelling Question(s):** How do cultures honor their dead? In what ways are funeral practices also representative of life?  |
| **Lesson Objectives:** Students will be able to: * explain the use and purpose of “fantasy” coffins in Ghana.
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| **Materials**  |
| * Class Projection Device
* Access to the following ASP item in the Indiana University Digital Toolbox:
	+ Coffin in the Form of a Fish
* Image(s) of Egyptian sarcophagus
* Videos
	+ [YouTube Video - Fantasy coffins in Ghana](https://youtu.be/7Z_qYYH6XOM)
	+ [YouTube Video - Interviews with Eric Anang](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT8lwdnNJw8)
* Articles about Fantasy Coffins
	+ [BBC Article - Ghana's red-hot funerals: Buried in a chilli pepper](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46142977)
	+ [The World - Ghana's fantasy coffins fulfilling burial dreams one coffin at a time](https://theworld.org/stories/2022-02-18/ghana-s-fantasy-coffins-fulfilling-burial-dreams-one-coffin-time)
	+ [CNN - Celebrating death in style: Ghana fantasy coffins](https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/29/africa/ghana-fantasy-coffin/index.html)
	+ [Metro - Ghana's fantasy coffins are anything but grave](https://metro.co.uk/2017/10/21/fish-shoes-and-chilli-peppers-ghanas-fantasy-coffins-are-anything-but-grave-6979614/)
* Article about American fantasy coffin
* https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna24463225
* Galleries of coffin images
	+ <https://www.nmfh.org/portfolio-item/a-life-well-lived-fantasy-coffins-from-ghana/>
	+ <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/14/africa/gallery/ghana-coffins-mpa/index.html>
	+ <https://metro.co.uk/2017/10/21/fish-shoes-and-chilli-peppers-ghanas-fantasy-coffins-are-anything-but-grave-6979614/> (at bottom of article are links to a variety of examples)
* [Article about Development of Egyptian Coffin](https://www.arce.org/resource/development-egyptian-coffin) (if want to extend to make comparison between the Ghana practice and the Ancient Egyptians)
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| **Learning Plan** |
| **Activities** 1. Begin by showing students an image/images of an Egyptian sarcophagus. Ask students what they know about this artifact. Students should be familiar with this image and should note that it was used for burial in Ancient Egypt.
2. Next, show students the Coffin in the Form of a Fish. Ask students what they notice about this artifact. Students may note that it is shaped like a fish. They might notice the stands on the bottom and infer the purpose behind those. They be able to tell that there is an opening as well and you can ask them to infer the purpose of the opening as well.

Notes: You could choose to do these steps in the opposite order, starting with the image of the Coffin in the Form of a Fish and then showing the students the Egyptian sarcophagus. You could then also choose to have students make comparisons between the images. Students could note how they are both colorful and decorative, that the design might hold some kind of purpose, etc. 1. After students have had time to investigate the image of the Coffin in the Form of a Fish, inform students that this is a common practice in Ghana for burial rites.
2. Next, depending on age/ability of students, you may choose to have them read any of the articles that have been linked in the Materials section. You might choose to adapt any of the articles to fit your students’ needs and abilities. While students engage with the text, you can employ the strategy of [annotating the text](https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/annotating-texts/). This could be done as a whole class or scaffolded to allow students to read independently and then share out information they noted. The purpose of doing this would be to help students note the purposes behind the use of fantasy coffins, why they are in so many different shapes and styles, how the practice has changed over time (i.e., the cost, materials; change in design from person’s background to interest; now serving as an art form), and how the coffins have become an export for Ghana.

Note: There are also videos included in the Materials section for your use. The first video is short and could be used as a supplement for or in addition to reading an article. The second video is a compilation of interviews with one of the Ghana coffin makers. This is choppy and long and therefore would not be good to show the complete video; however, pieces of it could be beneficial. For example, in the first interview, Eric Anang explains how the coffin designs have changed over time to be more about what the person was interested in instead of to show their status. He also later talks about what materials he uses. Later he discusses how urban development has affected the burial rite of the Ghana people. 1. Students can then analyze a variety of examples of fantasy coffins. As they do so, students can infer what they believe the person’s interests or background was based on the design.
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| **Assessment Suggestions**  Students could design their own fantasy coffin. They could then share with their peers why they designed theirs as they had. They also could be asked to write a brief description in which they also address why fantasy coffins are used in Ghana. If they annotated an article (or multiple articles), they could write a brief paragraph in which they use evidence from the article(s) to explain the use and purpose(s) of the fantasy coffins. This then incorporates literacy standards as well.  |
| **Extensions** Students could explore other burial/funeral/death rites from around the world, both historical and contemporary.  |

Coffin in the Form of a Fish Activity Possibilities

Some of the best opportunities for education are *integrative*—meaning that students are able to make connections across disciplines to reinforce the knowledge that they are developing. For example, they may be learning about Renaissance Italy in World Studies at the same time that they read Dante’s *Inferno* in English class while also studying Botticelli in Art. Feel free to combine and adapt some of the ideas across disciplines and standards to best suit your particular context. You can also collaborate with other teachers at your school or supplement the resources provided by contacting your librarian.

**Note: The following ideas are meant to give general guidance for teachers to include artifacts and other material culture in their classrooms. They are not meant to be treated as comprehensive activities or lessons that are one-size-fits-all for any classroom. They should be personalized to best fit the needs of a teacher’s individual context in accordance with prior student learning, student abilities, available resources, and any curriculum.**

**Art**

**Visual Arts – Responding:**

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| Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic workEnduring Understanding: Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed throughout engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments. Essential Question(s): How do life experiences influence the way you relate to art? How does learning about art impact how we perceive the world? What can we learn from our responses to art?  |
| VA:Re7.1.1a | *Select and describe works of art that illustrate daily life experiences.* |
| VA:Re7.1.6a | *Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.* |
| VA:Re7.1.Ia | *Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.* |
| VA:Re7.1.IIa | *Recognize and describe personal aesthetic and empathetic responses to the natural world and constructed environments* |
| VA:Re7.1.IIIa | *Analyze how responses to art develop over time based on knowledge of and experience with art and life* |

**Visual Arts – Connecting:**

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| Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. Enduring Understanding: People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art. Essential Question(s): How does art help us understanding the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures? How is art used to impact the videos of a society> How does art preserve aspects of life?  |
| VA:Cn11.1.1a | *Understand that people from different places and times have made art for a variety of reasons.* |
| VA:Cn11.1.2a | *Compare and contrast cultural uses of artwork from different times and places.* |
| VA:Cn11.1.3a | *Recognize that responses to art change depending on knowledge of the time and place in which it was made* |
| VA:Cn11.1.4a | *Through observation, infer information about time, place, and culture in which a work of art was created.* |
| VA:Cn11.1.6a | *Analyze how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.* |
| VA:Cn11.1.7a | *Analyze how response to art is influenced by understanding the time and place in which it was created, the available resources, and cultural uses* |
| VA:Cn11.1.8a | *Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity* |
| VA:Cn11.1.IIa | *Compare uses of art in a variety of social, cultural, and historical contexts and make connections to uses of art in contemporary and local contexts.* |
| VA:Cn11.1.IIIa | *Appraise the impact of an artist or a group of artists on the beliefs, values, and behaviors of a society.* |

*In examining the fantasy coffin, students can be asked to consider how these artifacts represent the customs and daily life of the people of Ghana. They can examine the aesthetic appeal of the coffin, the materials used, and how this art form represents how the people of Ghana view death.*

**Social Studies**

**Grade Contents**

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| K.3.6 | *Identify and compare similarities and differences in families, classmates, neighbors and neighborhoods, and ethnic and cultural groups.* |
| 1.1.1 | *Identify continuity and change between past and present in community life using primary sources.* ***Examples****: Clothing, the use of technology, methods of transportation, entertainment and customs; Compare the roles of men, women, and children; ethnic and cultural groups; types of work; schools and education in the community; and recreation* |
| 1.3.8 | *Compare cultural similarities and differences of various ethnic and cultural groups found in Indiana such as family traditions and customs, and traditional clothing and food* |
| 3.3.7 | *Compare the cultural characteristics of the local community with communities in other parts of the world.* |
| 7.3.3 | *Describe and compare major cultural characteristics of regions in Africa, Asia, and Southwest Pacific.* ***Examples****: language, religion, recreation, clothing, diet, fine arts, family structure, and traditions* |

**Sociology**

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| **S.2.1** | *Define culture and identify the material and non-material components of culture.*  |
| **ES.4.1** | *Identify culture conflict, cultural similarity, cultural diversity.* |

**Ethnic Studies**

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| **ES.3.1** | *Students identify and explore current traditions, rites, and norms of an ethnic or racial group(s) and how they have or are changing over time* |
| **ES.4.1** | *Students examine historical and contemporary economic, intellectual, social, cultural and political contributions to society by ethnic or racial group(s) or an individual within a group.*  |

*The Social Studies standards noted here all revolve around students examining cultural customs and traditions. The activity included above could be explored at the different age levels with alterations, scaffolding, and support for students. For example, younger children can explore the design and purpose of the fantasy coffins by looking at various examples while older students may make comparisons across cultural approaches to death rituals.*

**Language Arts**

**Writing Skills:**

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| 4.W.5  | Conduct short research on a topic. * Identify a specific question to address (e.g., What is the history of the Indy 500?).
* Use organizational features of print and digital sources to efficiently locate further information.
* Determine the reliability of the sources.
* Summarize and organize information in their own words, giving credit to the source
* Present the research information, choosing from a variety of formats.
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| 5.W.5 | Conduct short research assignments and tasks on a topic.* With support, formulate a research question (e.g., What were John Wooden’s greatest contributions to college basketball?).
* Identify and acquire information through reliable primary and secondary sources.
* Summarize and paraphrase important ideas and supporting details, and include direct quotations where appropriate, citing the source of information.
* Avoid plagiarism and follow copyright guidelines for use of images, pictures, etc.
* Present the research information, choosing from a variety of sources.
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*Students could conduct brief research projects on death/funeral/burial rituals of various cultures. They could either develop a presentation, a brief essay, or even a* [*one-pager*](https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/one-pagers/) *as a product.*